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Geology and geochronology of the Tana Basin, Ethiopia: LIP volcanism, super eruptions and Eocene-Oligocene environmental change

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Abstract

New geological and geochronological data define four episodes of volcanism for the Lake Tana region in the northern Ethiopian portion of the Afro-Arabian Large Igneous Province (LIP): pre-31 Ma flood basalt that yielded a single $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$ age of $34.05 \pm 0.54/0.56$ Ma; thick and extensive felsic ignimbrites and rhyolites (minimum volume of $2\text{--}3 \times 10^3 \text{ km}^3$) erupted between $31.108 \pm 0.020/0.041$ Ma and $30.844 \pm 0.027/0.046$ Ma (U-Pb CA-ID-TIMS zircon ages); mafic volcanism bracketed by $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$ ages of $28.90 \pm 0.12/0.14$ Ma and $23.75 \pm 0.02/0.04$ Ma; and localised scoraceous basalt with an $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$ age of $0.033 \pm 0.005/0.005$ Ma. The felsic volcanism was the product of super eruptions that created a 60–80 km diameter caldera marked by km-scale caldera-collapse fault blocks and a steep-sided basin filled with a minimum of 180 m of sediment and the present-day Lake Tana. These new data enable mapping, with a finer resolution than previously possible, Afro-Arabian LIP volcanism onto the timeline of the Eocene-Oligocene transition and show that neither the mafic nor silicic volcanism coincides directly with perturbations in the geochemical records that span that transition. Our results reinforce the view that it is not the development of a LIP alone but its rate of effusion that contributes to inducing global-scale environmental change.

Keywords: LIP, Eocene-Oligocene transition, Lake Tana, flood basalt, super eruption

1. Introduction

Temporal coincidence between Large Igneous Provinces (LIPs) and worldwide environmental perturbation is often considered evidence for causality (e.g. Bond & Wignall 2014; Burgess et al. 2014), yet the Afro-Arabian LIP, estimated as $0.6\text{--}1.1 \text{ M km}^2$

and $0.35\text{--}1.0 \times 10^6 \text{ km}^3$ (Mohr and Zanettin 1988; Dessert et al. 2003), seemingly had little influence on Cenozoic climate (Hofmann et al. 1997; Rochette et al. 1998; Ukstins Peate et al. 2003). Here we present new geological and geochronological data that provide a refined understanding of the development of that LIP and its temporal relationship to the climatic events of the Eocene-Oligocene transition.

1.1. Geological background. The Ethiopian Highlands are a volcanic massif of flood and shield volcano basalt 0.5 to 3 km thick that form spectacular trap topography (1500 to 4500 m altitudes) flanking the Main Ethiopian Rift (Fig. 1; Mohr 1983). Volcanic activity was protracted but episodic: flood basalt at 31-29 Ma, shield volcanoes at 30-19 and 12-10 Ma, felsic volcanism at 30-25, 20-15 and 12-3 Ma, and Pliocene-Quaternary basalt (Hofmann et al. 1997; Pik et al. 1998; Rochette et al. 1998; Ayalew et al. 2002; Ukstins et al. 2002; Coulié et al. 2003; Riisager et al. 2005). In the midst of the massif is a 16,500 km² topographic depression that contains Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile and Ethiopia's largest lake with a diameter of 60-80 km. The dominant rock type in the Tana region is low-Ti tholeiitic Miocene-Pliocene basalt and lesser amounts of felsites and non-marine sedimentary rocks and locally restricted basalt cinder cones and flows (Pik et al. 1998; Abate et al. 1998; Ayalew et al. 2002). Our petrological findings echo those of previous workers and show that compositions are bimodal: sub- to mildly alkaline (MgO 5.0-9.5 wt%) olivine- to plagioclase-phyric basalt, and dacites to rhyolites including banded finely crystalline to glassy rocks, crystal \pm lithic \pm vitric tuffs, obsidian-rich agglomerates and coarse ignimbrites.

2. Results: new geological data

Our mapping defined five major units (Figs. 2 and 3). Flood basalt, with a base at ~700 m elevation and its top at ~1600 m. An overlying unit, many tens to several hundreds of metres thick, of flow-banded rhyolite, pumice/lithic-rich and -poor tuffs, coarse-grained silicic ignimbrites, volcanic breccias and epiclastic sandstone and agglomerate (Fig. 4); clast sizes range from lapilli to bombs several metres in diameter. The felsic rocks occur in fault blocks hundreds of metres in width, 0.2 to 3 km in length and arranged centroclinally (dip generally inward) around the lake (Fig. 5a) although areas north and east of the lake exhibit a more jumbled fault pattern relative to southern and western areas. The fault blocks are present only within several tens of kilometres of Lake Tana

but the felsic rocks extend well beyond the map area.

The third unit ("Chilga beds" of Yemane et al. 1987) is patchily preserved, several tens to at least two hundred metres thick, and consists of organic-rich to lignitic mudstone and fine- to coarse-grained sandstone, thin felsic tuffs and silicite beds, and interlayered sparsely olivine-phyric amygdaloidal (quartz- or calcite-filled) basalt and andesitic basalt. The sedimentary rocks are lacustrine and fluvial deposits, and contain fossil bone and plant material that, along with associated palynomorphs, indicate that climate then was much wetter than today's (Yemane et al. 1987).

The fourth unit is olivine- and/or plagioclase-phyric and vesicle-rich to -poor basalt that form 2-3 km high plateaux. Its base is an unconformity along which successive basalt flows onlap and bury an irregular palaeotopography formed on the felsic fault blocks (Fig. 5b) and sedimentary-basalt unit ("Chilga beds"). Thick but variably developed kaolinite-rich weathering profiles beneath the unconformity surface indicate a substantial hiatus prior to the initial outpouring of the basalt forming the high plateaux. The fifth unit is scoraceous basalt and cinder cones in areas south of Lake Tana.

Our geophysical surveys show that Lake Tana overlies a basin marked by sub-vertical walls and filled with at least 180 m of flat-lying sediment (Fig. 6). The timing of sedimentation remains to be determined but linear extrapolation using a ^{14}C age of ~17 ka obtained at 10.2 m depth in a 90 m core through those sediments (Marshall et al. 2011) suggests that the base of the core is in excess of 150 ka. In effect, Tana is a steep-sided bowl filled with thick flat-lying sediments whose ultimate age is unknown but predate the scoraceous basalts that form the present-day dam and outflow of the lake.

2.1. Caldera-forming super eruptions. Previous workers interpreted the Tana basin as a consequence of the confluence of three rift structures (e.g. Chorowicz et al. 1998). Our new data suggest that it is a caldera: the centroclinal fault blocks decrease in magnitude (over distances of tens of kilometres) away from the lake and pre-date the unconformably overlying sedimentary-basalt ("Chilga beds") and plateaux-forming basalt units thus are unrelated to the younger high-angle, largely dip-slip faults that transect all the rock units in the Tana basin and which are part of the Neogene opening of the Main Ethiopia Rift. Further, the ignimbrites and associated felsic rocks are thickest and coarsest adjacent to Tana and thin and fine in all directions away from the lake. These rocks cover at least 10,000 km² but extend far beyond the map area and average 200-300 m in thickness

hence their minimum eruptive volume would have been 2000-3000 km³. These are characteristics of super eruptions (e.g. Bryan and Ferrari 2013) and jointly with the seismic data underpin our interpretation that Tana is a caldera ringed by fault blocks formed by caldera collapse. Today's landscape reflects this ancient caldera exhumed by head-ward erosion of the Blue Nile River system.

3. Results: new geochronology data

Our geochronology strategy was designed to constrain the timing of emplacement of the felsic unit, determine the ages of the basalts bounding that unit and define the age of the basalts that dam the outflow of the present-day lake (Figs. 2 and 3). Dates are shown with two levels of uncertainty ($\pm A/B$) where A is the analytical uncertainty and B is the analytical uncertainty combined with systematic uncertainties related to calibration and decay constants; details of the samples, dating methodologies and analytical results can be found in the Supplemental Files.

Age constraints for the felsic volcanism are from zircons separated from four samples and analysed at the NERC Isotope Geoscience Laboratory, UK, using U-Pb chemical abrasion-isotope dilution-thermal ionisation mass spectrometry (CA-ID-TIMS); all samples were spiked using the gravimetrically calibrated ET535 or ET2535 EARTHTIME U-Pb tracer solutions (Condon et al. 2015; McLean et al. 2015; see Supplemental Files). Constraints for the mafic volcanism are by ⁴⁰Ar/³⁹Ar analyses on four samples done at the NERC Argon Isotope Facility, UK, following methods outlined in Mark et al. 2010 (see Supplemental Files).

3.1. Felsic samples. Sample Hydro-1 is a lapilli tuff near the base of the felsite unit ~7 km southwest of Kunzla; four zircons were analysed and yield a mean age of 31.108 \pm 0.020/0.041 Ma. Sample Zege-1 is a flow-banded stony rhyolite in the central part of the felsite unit exposed in an erosional window through Quaternary basalt ~7 km west of Bahir Dar; four zircons were analysed and yield a mean age of 31.033 \pm 0.018/0.041 Ma. Samples Yifag-2 and Aby-1 are flow-banded feldspar-phyric rhyolites from the upper part of the felsite unit ~1.5 and 1 km west of Yifag, respectively; five zircons from each were analysed and yield mean ages of 30.858 \pm 0.024/0.044 Ma and 30.844 \pm 0.027/0.046 Ma, respectively.

3.2. Mafic samples. All mafic samples are olivine- and/or plagioclase-phyric basalt. Sample BNG1 was collected near the top of the lower flood basalt ~0.5 km southeast of the Blue Nile Falls and yielded a total fusion age of $34.05 \pm 0.54/0.56$ Ma. Sample WD1 is from the sedimentary-basalt unit ~8 km west of Aykel and yielded a plateau age of $28.90 \pm 0.12/0.14$ Ma. Sample KNZ1 is from the lower part of the upper basalt unit ~3 km south of Kunzla and yielded a plateau age of $23.75 \pm 0.02/0.04$ Ma. Sample BHD1 is from the outflow of the Blue Nile River in Bahir Dar and yielded a plateau age of $0.033 \pm 0.005/0.005$ Ma.

3.3. Geochronology summary. The new geochronology defines four distinct episodes of volcanism: (i) ~1 km thick flood basalt likely as old as ~34 Ma but of unknown duration; (ii) caldera-forming silicic super eruptions at ~31 Ma spanning ~250 kyr with a minimum erupted volume of 2000-3000 km³; (iii) a second episode of mafic volcanism starting perhaps as early as ~29 Ma and extending to at least ~24 Ma; and (iv) localised basalt flows and cinder cones 33 ka in age. The 34 Ma age is older than the 31-29 Ma ages typically attributed to Ethiopian flood basalt (Hofmann et al. 1997; Rochette et al. 1998) and, even if that age is downplayed, this flood basalt can be no younger than the c. 31 Ma age of the overlying felsic rocks and hence older than most previously documented Afro-Arabian flood basalt. Determining if these phases are distinct requires further geochronology and mapping.

4. Discussion: Tana volcanism and Eocene-Oligocene environmental change

Stable isotope and organic geochemistry trends for the Cenozoic define one of the finest timelines of global change for anytime in Earth history (Fig. 7). Our new data permit a stricter evaluation than previously possible of Afro-Arabian LIP volcanism to those data.

4.1. Atmospheric CO₂ drawdown and C-O isotopes. Following a zenith of global warmth at ~55 Ma climate underwent a descent into the current state of bipolar icecaps (e.g. Zachos et al. 2001; Pälike et al 2006). The late Eocene-early Oligocene receives particular attention because of temporally distinct, sharp steps in C-O isotopes (~1-1.5‰, e.g. Oi1 and Oi-2 on Fig. 7; e.g. Miller et al. 1991; Coxall & Wilson 2011 and references therein) and declines in atmospheric CO₂ (~300-500 ppm; e.g. Zhang et al. 2013; Armstrong McKay et al. 2016 and references therein), each experiencing durations

estimated to be between several 10^4 and 10^5 years.

LIP emissions can generate global warming but can also cause global cooling due to drawdown of those gases via weathering of fresh basalt. The Afro-Arabian LIP comprises ~13% of today's exposed basalt but only accounts for ~4% of the annual flux of CO_2 drawdown because of its arid setting (Dessert et al. 2003). However, that region's climate was much wetter during the Oligo-Miocene (e.g. Yemane et al. 1987) and, although no quantitative estimates exist for how much wetter, the then rate of consumption of atmospheric CO_2 of fresh basalt would have been higher than today's.

A back-of-the-envelope calculation can be undertaken to assess what the potential effect of the Tana eruptions might have been on atmospheric CO_2 drawdown, and we make two assumptions: (i) that the present-day preserved outcrop area of the Afro-Arabian LIP approximates the original extent of flood basalt; and (ii) a flux of 4×10^{12} $\text{molCO}_2/\text{year}$, representative of today's other low-latitude flood basalt provinces (Parana, Deccan, Central American; Dessert et al. 2003), is a reasonable approximation for the weathering of those basalts during Palaeogene time. The latter assumption is justifiable because fossil evidence indicates relatively high precipitation during emplacement of the Afro-Arabian LIP, which has 30-50% more surface area than those provinces. Further, estimates of globally averaged CO_2 consumption by basalt weathering vary by ~4x, from 1.75×10^{13} $\text{molCO}_2/\text{year}$ (Navarre-Stichler and Brantley 2007) to 4.08×10^{12} $\text{molCO}_2/\text{year}$ (Dessert et al. 2003) hence the chosen flux is a reasonable estimate. Depending on estimates of atmospheric composition, 1 ppm of atmospheric CO_2 equates to between ~3 to 7.8 Gt. Generating the stepwise decreases of 300-500 ppm CO_2 would have required drawing down 2300-3900 Gt. Simplifying the calculation to focus solely on weathering, a time-averaged flux of 4×10^{12} $\text{molCO}_2/\text{year}$ would have drawn-down ~0.02 $\text{GtCO}_2/\text{year}$, requiring ~50-200 kyr to generate the estimated magnitude of change indicated by each of the step-wise declines of CO_2 . Volcanic degassing and/or cryptic degassing (Armstrong McKay et al. 2014) would have acted to reduce the declines but, given the worldwide cooling trend at that time, that influence must have been minimal.

This thought experiment shows that a rate of weathering-induced CO_2 drawdown can be obtained that is compatible with that implied by previous workers for the two drops in Eocene-Oligocene CO_2 . However, mapping our geochronological data onto the timeline of Eocene-Oligocene environmental change (Fig. 7) refutes that possibility. Assuming that (i) the c. 10^{4-5} year estimated durations required to drawdown CO_2 are

correct to within an order-of-magnitude and (ii) the absolute ages of those drawdowns based on the proxy records are broadly correct, then the c. 34 Ma episode of flood basalt predates by at least 0.5-1 Myr the proposed timing of the earlier drop in atmospheric CO₂ that began prior to the Eocene-Oligocene boundary (Fig. 7). Further, the second drop in CO₂ occurred ~3 Myr after the c. 29 Ma onset of the younger phase of mafic volcanism. The modelled *p*CO₂ data over that time are, within error, largely invariant for 3-4 Myr through the outpouring of the c. 34-31 Ma flood basalt and c. 31 Ma silicic eruptions, yet show a slight increase during the apparent gap in volcanic activity in the Tana region. Thus, there is a temporal disconnect between the timing of volcanic activity and the pattern of CO₂ fluctuations indicated by the proxy data records (Fig. 7). Although weathering of the Afro-Arabian basalts no doubt contributed to long-term CO₂ drawdown (e.g. Lefebvre et al. 2013; Kent & Muttoni 2013), our findings rule out volcanism as a key influence on the shorter-term, 10⁴⁻⁵ year draw-down timescales implied by the various CO₂ proxy data.

Our geochronology also reveals that there is no consistent relationship between the trend of O- and C-isotopes and the timing of mafic volcanism. O isotopes increase, and sharply so (i.e. at Oi-1, Fig. 7), entering the c. 34-31 Ma phase of volcanism but maintain a broadly invariant trend throughout that phase. In contrast, O-isotopes remain unperturbed across the initiation of the c. 29 Ma phase of mafic volcanism, reach a zenith (marked by Oi-2; Fig. 7) several millions of years after that onset, and then decline throughout the remaining phase of volcanic activity. We do not know the exact timing of onset of the pre-31 Ma flood basalt, and it is tempting to consider a possible link to the sharp increase in slope in O isotopes at the Eocene-Oligocene transition, but additional geochronology is needed to test this plausibility. The C-isotope profile also shows contrary relationships between volcanic episodes: C isotopes rise irregularly and then fall steadily through the c. 34-31 Ma phase of mafic volcanism, are unperturbed during the c. 31 Ma super eruptions, and rise irregularly through the c. 29-23 Ma phase of mafic volcanism. Thus, the c. 34-23 Myr span of Afro-Arabian LIP volcanism in the Tana region failed to imprint significantly on the isotopic compositions of the Eocene-Oligocene oceans and atmosphere.

4.2. Volatiles as kill mechanisms. The rate and magnitude of injection of sulphur and halogen molecules into the atmosphere from LIP volcanism has been highlighted as kill

mechanisms for mass extinction especially when devolitalisation of evaporite- and organic-rich country rock occurs (e.g. Chenet et al. 2007; Svensen et al. 2009; Brand et al. 2012; Black et al. 2012). The Afro-Arabian LIP silicic volcanism released ~ 45 Gt S and ~ 224 Gt Cl (Ayalew et al. 2002), in part attributable to volatiles derived from the 1-2 km thick Mesozoic succession of which $\sim 50\%$ consists of marine carbonate and evaporite rocks and minor lignites and coals (Wolela et al. 2008). No such estimates have been made for the mafic volcanism, but a first-order approximation for the potential amount of degassed volatiles from both the silicic and mafic lavas can be attempted. We make a supposition that the amounts of S and Cl devolitalised by both types of volcanism scaled proportionally to their respective volumes. The volume of basalt in the Afro-Arabian LIP is $\sim 6 \times 10^4$ km³, which is 5-15x the total volume that has been estimated for felsic volcanism across the entire LIP ($0.3\text{--}1 \times 10^6$ km³; Ukstins Peate et al. 2003). As such, Afro-Arabian volcanism could have released 250 to 750 Gt S and 1300 to 3600 Gt Cl, amounts that are comparable at order-of-magnitude uncertainties to those for other LIPs such as the Deccan and Siberian traps (e.g. Black et al. 2012; Self et al. 2008). However, Afro-Arabian volcanism postdates the c. 34–33.7 Ma acme of progressive/stepwise plankton extinctions (Keller 2005; Pearson et al. 2008; Peters et al. 2013), which highlights that, although the total halogen effusion of the Afro-Arabian LIP may have been large enough to affect deleteriously the biosphere, the rate of effusion was below a threshold necessary to cause major disruptions in ecosystems. A temporally calibrated example is the Central Atlantic Magmatic Province where only the first (~ 600 kyr in duration) of four volcanic pulses can be linked to an extinction event and the three later pulses had little to no effect on the biosphere (Blackburn et al. 2013).

4.3. Silicic super eruptions. Our new data show that the Tana felsic eruptions were comparable to some of the largest explosive volcanic events in Earth history. These spanned 2-3 Myr as evident from $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$ plateau and single crystal ages and Rb-Sr isochron ages on thick, widespread ignimbrites and tuffs elsewhere in Ethiopia, and on correlative tephra layers 2700 km distant in the Indian Ocean (Baker et al. 1996; Coulié et al. 2003; Ukstins Peate et al. 2003, 2008; Riisager et al. 2005). The timing of Oi-1 and the c. 31 Ma super eruptions is interesting (Fig. 7) but similar spikes in O-isotopes occur episodically through the Eocene-Oligocene, which urges caution and consideration of that relationship as a coincidence rather than as a cause-and-effect, particularly given that the

O-isotope profile through the short interval of Tana super eruptions exhibits jagged rises and falls not unlike those marking the several millions of years preceding and postdating the super eruptions. As for the other isotopic proxies, they remain unperturbed by those eruptions (Fig. 7). Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the mid-Oligocene eruption (c. 28 Ma) of the La Garita caldera that formed the Fish Canyon Tuff, the volumetrically largest well-constrained silicic super eruption known for the Phanerozoic (e.g. Wotzlaw et al. 2014), likewise does not coincide with a perturbation in the stable isotope data.

5. Conclusion. Mapping of our new age constraints onto the timeline for Eocene-Oligocene environmental change reveals that there is neither a synchronicity in the initiation of nor a consistency in the trend of the changes-in-slopes of marine isotopic compositions and atmospheric CO₂ records from one volcanic event to another during the Afro-Arabian LIP. This reconfirms that Afro-Arabian LIP volcanism was seemingly ineffectual in causing significant deviation of the trajectory of climate change that had begun in the early Palaeogene. Unlike the <1-2 Myr timescales documented for the duration of other Phanerozoic LIPs, Afro-Arabian LIP volcanism was protracted and lacked the necessary and sufficient rates of effusion and volatile emission to influence global-scale environmental change. Further, assuming that the Tana super eruptions are typical of those at other times in Earth history, our data imply that the role of super eruptions in inducing Earth System change most likely has to be as part of an ensemble of environmental circumstances rather than as a solo act.

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Figure 1. Generalised Cenozoic geology of the regions bordering the Main Ethiopian Rift system (simplified from the Geological Map of Ethiopia). Circled 'A' is the location of Addis Ababa.

Figure 2. Simplified geological map of the Lake Tana region based on mapping done during this work.

Figure 3. Stratigraphy of the Lake Tana region showing the four map units and position of geochronology samples. See text for details and Supplementary Files for GPS locations of samples. m.a.s.l. – metres above sea level.

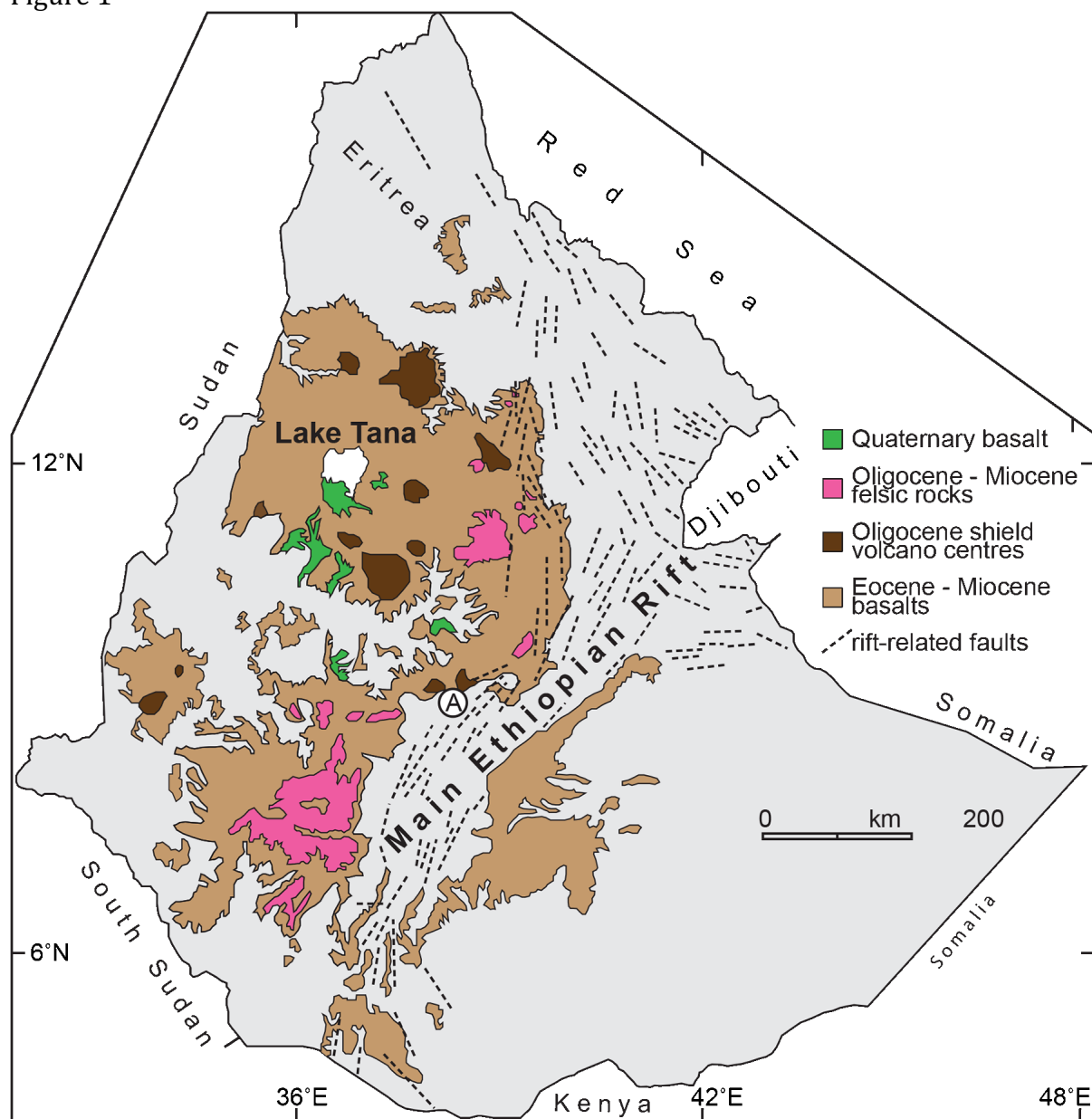
Figure 4. Felsic volcanic rocks. **A.** Rhyolite domes 10-20 km southeast of Kunzla (southwest corner of Lake Tana). **B.** Tilted rhyolite dome 5 km west of Gorgora (north-central margin of Lake Tana); basal part consists of flow-banded rhyolite whereas inner part of dome consists of more massive rhyolite. **C.** Flow-banded rhyolite of sample Aby-1 (northeast corner of Lake Tana) that yielded a U-Pb zircon age of $30.844 \pm 0.027/0.046$ Ma. **D and E.** Massive ignimbrite flows and large bomb of pumiceous and banded rhyolite (~12 km west of Yifag, northeast margin of Lake Tana). **F and G.** Fragmental texture of ignimbrite deposits; F contains a variety of felsic clasts and minor mafic clasts whereas G is mostly pumice (area west of Gorgora, north-central shoreline of Lake Tana). **H.** Cross-bedded volcanoclastic conglomerate-sandstone with obsidian and felsic volcanic clasts and rare basalt clasts; this unit overlies sharply the felsic tuff of sample Hydro-1 (15 km southwest of Kunzla) that yielded a U-Pb zircon age of $31.108 \pm 0.020/0.041$ Ma.

Figure 5. Structural features of the felsic unit. **A.** East-tilted fault blocks of silicic ignimbrite and tuff (~5 km northwest of Kunzla, southwest margin of Lake Tana). **B.** Progressive onlap and burial of c. 31 Ma southwest-tilted felsic rocks by flat-lying c. 24 Ma basalt (~20 km south of Kunzla).

Figure 6. Seismic profile showing steep-sided bedrock margin beneath Lake Tana and how the sedimentary fill abuts against and buries those margins. The sediments are >180m thick (and likely much thicker) and linear extrapolation of the ^{14}C age for the topmost desiccation surface (Marshall et al. 2011) would imply that the base of the seismically imaged sediment is in excess of 150 ka.

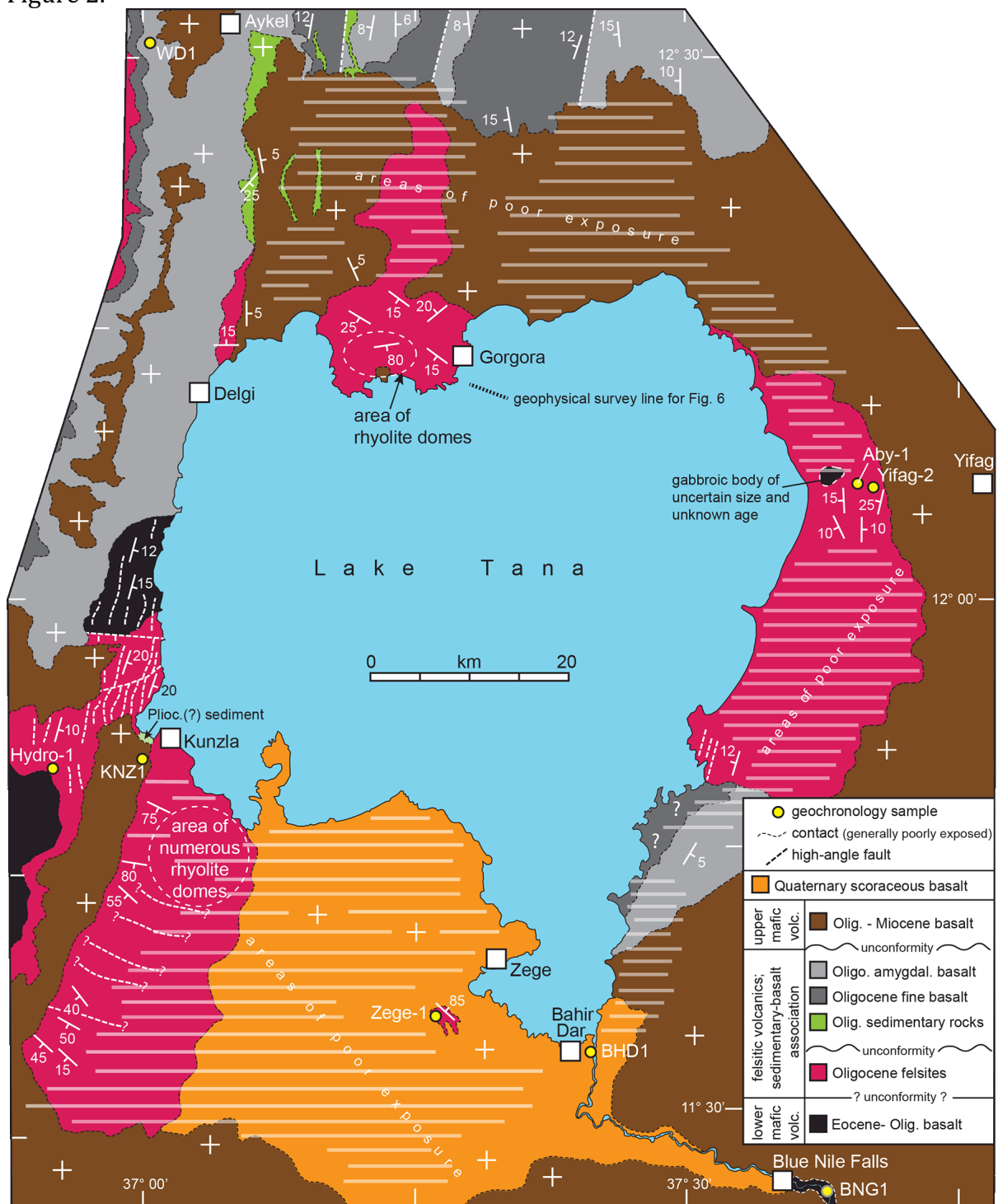
Figure 7. Isotopic and atmospheric CO_2 envelopes for the Cenozoic; grey and black shading denotes age brackets for volcanism in the Lake Tana and surrounding regions. C- and O-isotope envelopes are from Zachos et al. (2001, 2008) and other proposed best-fit solid lines are from Cramer et al. (2009). CO_2 trends generalised from multiple proxies as reported by Pagani et al. (2011) and Zhang et al. (2013). Timescale calibration follows Westerhold et al. (2014). Oi and Mi: oxygen isotope events.

526 Figure 1

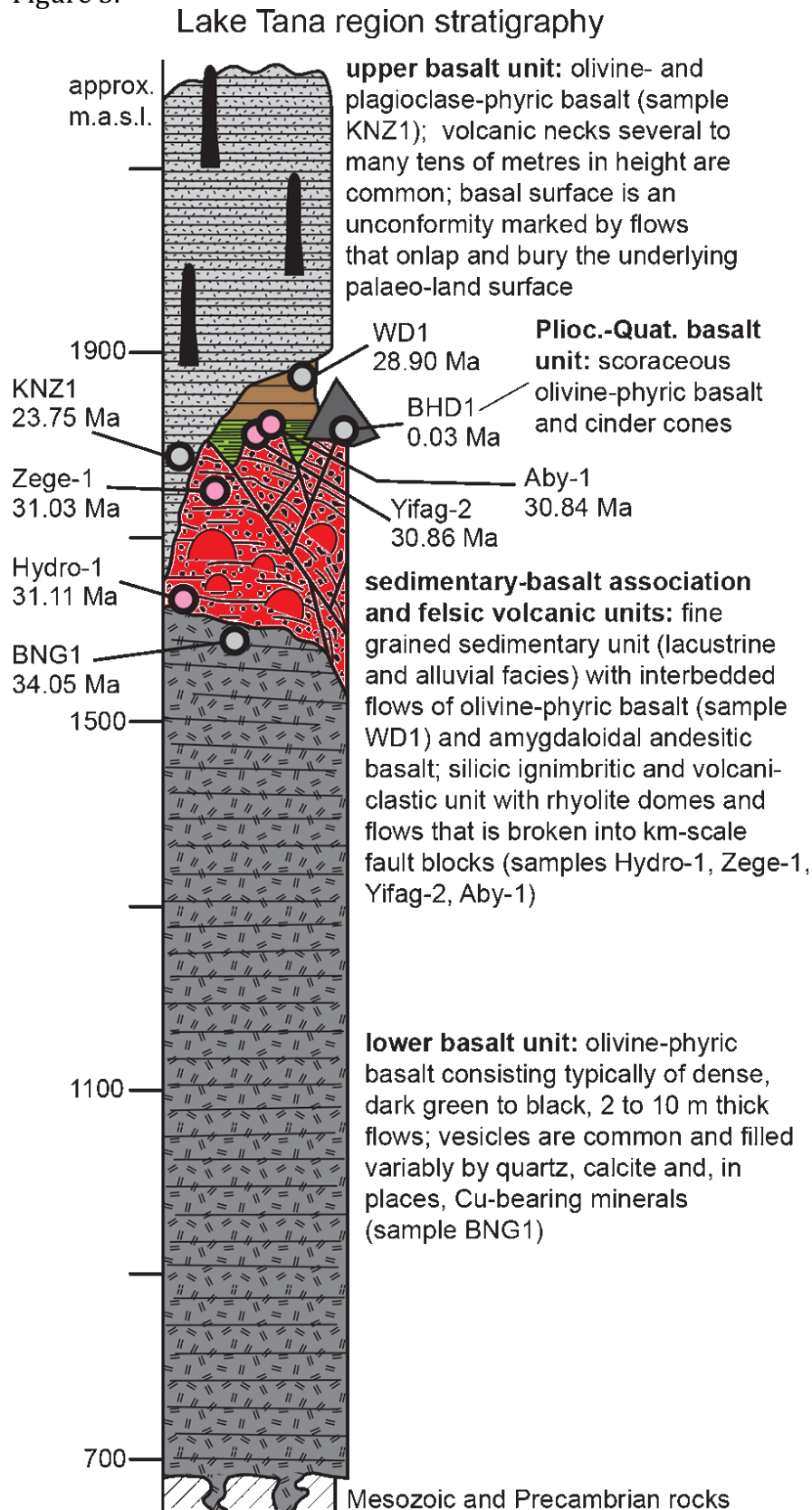


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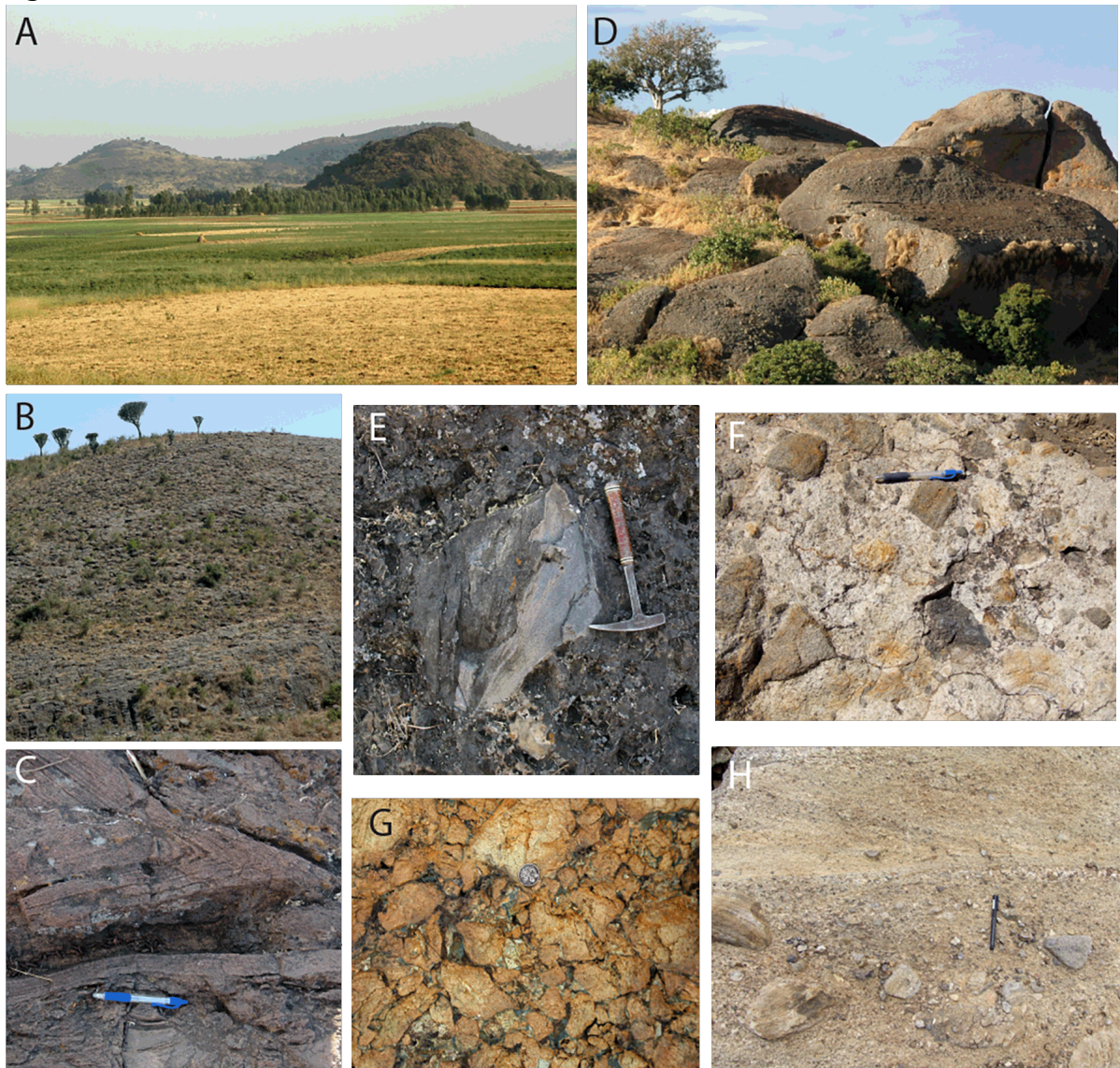
530 Figure 2.



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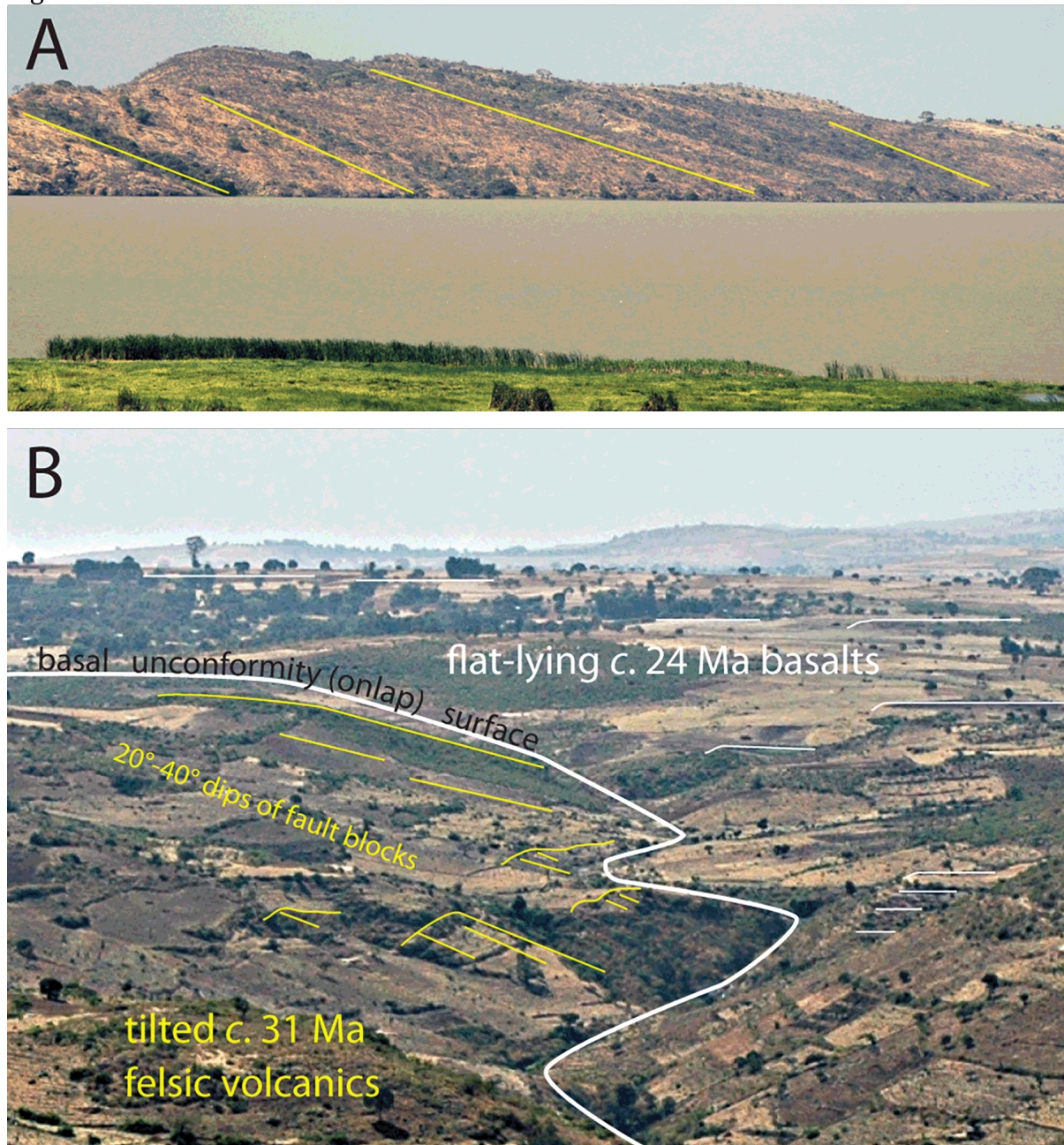


538 Figure 4.



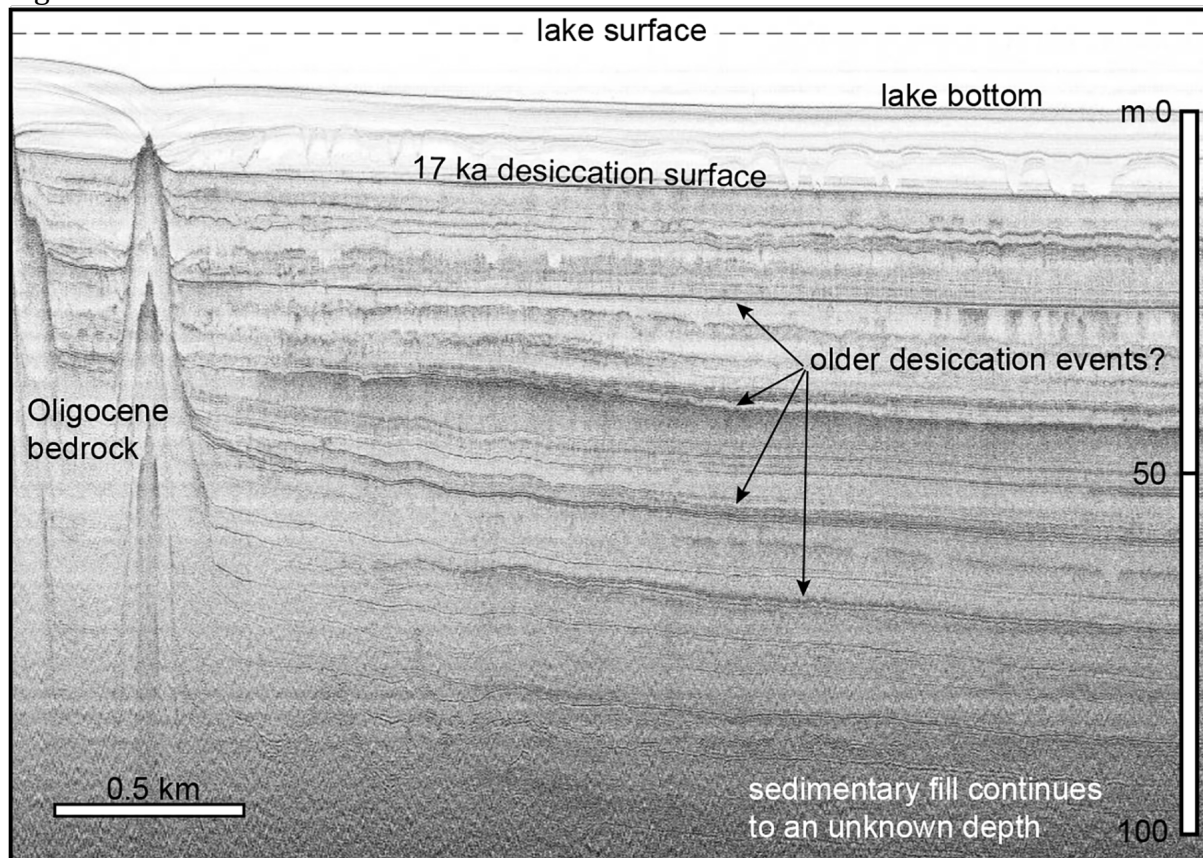
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542 Figure 5.



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